

Deepest Hurt

Hurt & Comfort - III

MultiMapper

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Hurt & Comfort:

Book 3: Deepest Hurt

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Chapter 1: The Gift and the Price

The portal opened to reveal Dawn and Tara. Each was holding a suitcase and behind them was a stack of boxes. In the week since Dawn and Tara had left, the men had grown stronger and were approaching full health.

"Okay guys, let's start hauling." Dawn said brightly as she stepped into her bedroom.

"You heard her. Let's get moving." Scott said and stepped into the portal and grabbed a box.

"What do you have in here? Do you have a rock collection?" Scott asked with strain in his voice.

"Books. Willow doesn't need the magic books anymore, so I volunteered to keep them safe for the Scoobies... and from Willow." Tara said as she sat her suitcase on the bed.

Piotr and Bobby each were carrying a box when Jean walked into the room.

"Jean! You're looking so much better." Dawn said as she ran to Jean and gave her a big hug.

"Thanks Dawn. I'm feeling much better. Have the guys told you about the party yet?" Jean asked as she pulled out of the hug.

"Party? No, who's having a party?" Dawn asked with excitement.

"It is the first official Summers family reunion. Alex will be here this afternoon and we're going to party at the boathouse tonight. You and Tara are officially invited." Alan said with a smile as he carried a box through the portal.

"Where are Xander and Remy?" Tara asked, looking at the group of men.

"They're with the kids having story time. It's turned out to be a daily event. Usually we would all be there listening to the children reading *Star Wars* books, but we took today off so we could move you back in." Scott said as he hefted the last box into the room.

"I'm sorry I'm missing that, it sounds like fun." Dawn said as she opened a box and started unpacking.

"It is. Do you have everything you need?" Andrew asked as he stood before the portal.

"Yeah. Buffy and the gang wanted to be here to see me off, but they had to go do research on the demon of the week." Dawn said and started lining books up on her bookshelf.

Andrew withdrew his power from the portal and said, "Then we're going to be leaving, I for one want to catch at least part of the *Star Wars* story today."

There were collective sounds of agreement coming from the other men as they also made ready to leave the room.

"So when's the party?" Dawn asked Alan, as he was about to leave.

"When Alex gets here. Someone will come and get you two and the party will begin." Alan said happily.

Dawn nodded and went back to work as Alan left the room to catch today's installment of story time.

* * * * *

The taxi pulled up in front of the mansion and Alex stepped out. After a moment the double doors swung open to reveal an ocean of people coming out to greet him.

"Alex! You made good time. I don't know why you insisted on taking a taxi but I'm glad you made it." Scott said as he hugged his brother.

"I took a taxi so you wouldn't have to drive for an hour, wait for me, then drive an hour back. It just didn't make sense..."

besides, I wanted to meet with all the family at once." Alex said as he pulled his suitcases out of the trunk of the taxi.

"Well, our brother is right here. Alex, this is Alan." Scott said proudly as he indicated Alan.

"He is the spitting image of you bro." Alex said and shook Alan's hand.

"I get the feeling that's about to change." Alan said with a slightly sour look.

"How so?" Alex asked with interest.

"Andrew has been trying to convince me to dye my hair so people could tell Scott and I apart at a glance." Alan said, then leaned close to whisper, {I'll end up doing it, but it's fun to make him work for it.}

"Andrew?" Alex asked aloud.

"Yeah, this is Andrew, Alan's partner." Scott said and nudged Andrew forward to meet Alex.

"It's good to meet you. Your brother has told me a lot about you." Andrew said shyly.

"Yeah, well don't believe a word of it till I've had a chance to tell my side of the story." Alex said with a smirk.

From the doorway came two women who got Alex's attention immediately.

"This is our sister Dawn and her girlfriend Tara." Scott said and indicated them with a sweep of his arm.

"Nice to meet you both. I always wanted a sister." Alex said with a shy smile.

"Well, now you've got one. Where's the party?" Dawn asked as she looked toward Scott.

"We're going to have the party in the boathouse. It isn't fully furnished yet, but we have enough beds for everyone and the essential furniture for us to be comfortable.

Besides, this way we can be as loud as we want without worrying about bothering the children." Scott said and grabbed one of Alex's suitcases and walked into the mansion.

Andrew was at Scott's side and walked to the doorway that led into a classroom.

"Come on, we'll take the short cut." Andrew said as he walked through the doorway.

"That's just a classroom." Alex said in confusion.

"Come on in and see for yourself." Alan said as he stepped through the doorway.

Alex walked through and found himself in the boathouse's main room.

"How?" He asked in wonder.

"That's Andrew's mutant ability. He can create doorways from one place to another... or one dimension to another." Alan said proudly and gave Andrew a hug.

"Alex, here are two other people I'd like for you to meet." Scott said, leading two men.

"This is Xander, and this is Remy. They live here with us too." Scott said indicating first Xander wearing an eye patch, and then Remy wearing blacked out sunglasses.

"How many people live here?" Alex asked as he made himself comfortable on the sofa, next to Jean.

"Well, Andrew and Alan have the master bedroom here on the main floor. Xander and Remy are in the room upstairs on the left, you and I will have the room upstairs on the right." Scott said to the group.

"Don't tell me we're sharing a bed." Alex said cautiously.

"No, we had single beds in the mansion when we were all injured. We just moved them into the rooms so everyone

would have a place to sleep. When you go back to Hawaii and Remy is healed up and goes back to his dimension, Xander and I will get bigger beds in our rooms." Scott said patiently.

"So Xander and Remy aren't a couple?" Alex asked in confirmation.

"What do you say guys? Have you been holding out on us?" Scott asked with a tone of teasing.

"*Non*, Remy an Xander don be doin dat." Remy said with a smile.

"Dawn and Tara don't live here?" Alex asked.

"They have a room in the mansion, but they are welcomed to stay here in the living room tonight if they want. The sofa pulls out into a bed... and the thing is surprisingly comfortable." Alan answered before Scott had the chance.

"Okay, who's going to fill me in on everything that's happened, I have the feeling that I'm missing a few pages of the story." Alex asked the group.

"Dawn? Why don't you tell it? You're best at it." Andrew said, as he snuggled against Alan's side.

Dawn followed Andrew's lead and snuggled against Tara. "It all started when Andrew accidentally opened a portal in Arizona..."

* * * * *

After the whole story had been told, the group began to chatter about anything and everything. Jean nearly choked with laughter at Andrew's telling of Scott's first glimpse of his power.

//Xander, bring Remy to the MedLab, he needs to be prepped for immediate surgery.// The professor projected into Xander's mind.

"Remy, the professor just called. They must have found some eyes for you. We need to get to the MedLab right away." Xander said as he interrupted conversation.

"I'll open a portal for you." Andrew said seriously and opened it right before the two men.

"We should probably get a few things together..." Xander began when Alan interrupted.

"Just go, we'll all be visiting often enough that we can bring you whatever you need."

Xander nodded and placed Remy's hand on his elbow to lead him through the portal.

"We'll all take turns checking in on you two. Don't worry about anything." Scott said as the two walked through the portal.

* * * * *

Remy was led to a bed and immediately stripped and put into a medical gown. He was hooked up to an IV and within five minutes of arriving in the MedLab was fast asleep.

"How long is this going to take?" Xander asked as Hank was furiously gathering the things he needed.

"There are too many factors involved to make any type of prediction. Mr. Harris, I know that you are concerned for your friend, but I must ask you to wait in the outer room. Doctor Samuelson will be arriving within half an hour with the eyes. We will want to begin surgery immediately upon his arrival. I understand that you won't leave MedLab, but I cannot have you in the surgical area." Hank said professionally.

Xander nodded in understanding and left the room.

* * * * *

The group in the boathouse were silent with worry. None of them could think of anything but what was happening in

MedLab and worrying for both Xander and Remy.

"I've got to do something or I'm going to go nuts." Scott finally said and began pacing the room.

"Why don't we do what Remy asked back when he first got told about getting new eyes." Alan suggested to the group.

"What's that?" Jean asked.

"Find out everything we can about the donor of the eyes. I get the feeling that Remy's going to want to do something to honor the memory of the donor. It would give us something to do, and I know that Remy would appreciate the effort... besides, I promised." Alan finished with a sheepish smile.

Andrew kissed Alan on the cheek and formed a portal in the middle of the room.

"First stop, computer lab." Andrew announced and indicated the portal.

"Dawn and I are going to use a different method for research, so we'll walk." Tara said and led Dawn out of the room.

"I'm going to MedLab and see if Xander needs anything." Scott said and Andrew immediately opened a second portal and gestured for Scott to go through.

"I'm going to talk to the professor, maybe he can help with Cerebro." Jean offered.

Andrew nodded and closed the MedLab portal and opened one to the hallway outside the professor's office.

"Thanks Andrew." Jean said with a shy smile and exited into the hallway.

Andrew noticed that Alex was sitting and watching the events.

"You want to come to help us in the computer lab?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yeah, I'm just a little surprised to see how you all pulled together like that. You really are a family." Alex said in wonder.

"Yes, WE are. Alex, we would all be doing the same thing if you needed the help. For better or worse, you're one of us, we all care about each other." Andrew said and extended a hand to help Alex off the couch.

Alex took the offered hand and stood.

"Come on bro, we have some detective work to do." Alan said and led the way through the portal.

Andrew and Alex followed in short order.

* * * * *

Tara and Dawn walked out of the boathouse and went to the edge of the lake.

"Look into the water and see if you can focus on the eyes that Remy is going to receive." Dawn said as she sat and made herself comfortable.

"How do I do that? I mean, last time, I just looked into the water and it showed me things." Tara asked carefully.

"You do the same thing this time, but at the same time you will try to draw the image of Remy's eyes to you. I can't really describe it beyond that. You'll just know that the eyes are what you're looking for." Dawn said, trying to find the words to describe the sensation.

Tara let herself see the magical world and focused on the water. After long moments of looking, she finally said in a near trance state, "I see the eyes... what do I do now?"

{Focus on the eyes and follow them back to the donor. Just watch the images and let them happen, but *will* the images

to show you the history.} Dawn said in a whisper so as not to startle Tara out of her trance.

"Oh God, I can see the hospital where they are taking the eyes from a woman. She's hurt so bad... and she... she was pregnant." Tara said and finished with a sob.

{Dear Goddess.} Dawn whispered. Then in a low voice, she asked, "Did the child survive?"

"She's so small. Too small. She's hooked up to all kinds of tubes and wires. Oh Dawn, she's so weak, I can barely see the spark of her life." Tara said in sorrow.

"When are you seeing...? Tara, we need to see the present." Dawn said carefully.

"Yes, it's now. She's so weak. She's too small to survive outside the womb. Is there anything we can do to help her?" Tara asked with a trembling voice.

"I'm going to join my power with yours. I don't know if it will be enough but we will try." Dawn said and took Tara's hand into her own.

A mist rose around the two and Dawn quietly said, "Form the image in the mist, the combination of air and water. Make the image so that I can see and maybe help."

Tara focused the image into the mist and it formed into the image of a small baby, not even the size of Tara's hand.

"Dear Goddess." Dawn muttered, as tears streaked down her face.

"Can we help?" Tara asked with a sob, fearing the answer.

"We can try."

* * * * *

Ororo felt the disturbance in the forces of nature. Quietly she crept out of the mansion and into the back yard. There

was a sense of urgency that she couldn't account for and she found herself running toward the lake.

Just before she reached the water's edge she saw Dawn and Tara kneeling by the water, shrouded in mist.

"We don't have enough power to cast the spell. I've drawn as much mist as I can into being but it isn't enough to save the baby." Dawn said and began to cry.

Orooro could just make out the image of a small, too small, baby floating between the two. Not understanding it completely, but knowing that it was important, Orooro called on her command of the elements of nature to bring in a dense fog.

"Dawn? Can you feel it? There is more power... let's try the spell." Tara asked with a glimmer of hope in her voice.

Continuing to hold Tara's hand, Dawn stood and helped Tara to stand too.

After a cleansing breath she said in a trance-like tone. "I call upon the Sylph to lend their aid to this child. Protect her air and maintain her life's breath. Great Sylph, I entreat you to protect this child as one of your own and guard her life."

Tara understood the invocation and as soon as Dawn fell silent, she began to speak. "I call upon the Undine to lend their aid to this child. Protect her water and cleanse the water of her life. Great Undine, I beseech you to protect this child as one of your own and guard her."

Then as one they said, "She shall henceforth be known as a child of Adam, a child of Sylph and a child of Undine. So let it be, so let it be, so let it be."

Orooro watched the image strengthen then fade into nothingness. All the fog in the area suddenly dissipated and the air was clear.

"Thank you Orooro." Dawn said without looking toward her.

"I could feel that it was necessary, but I would like an explanation now that it is done." Orroro said steadily as she walked up to the two women, still holding hands.

"The eyes that Remy is going to receive come from a woman who was pregnant. That was an image of her child, struggling for life. The three of us just gave that little girl a chance." Tara said and took Dawn into her arms.

"So you healed the child?" Orroro asked in confusion.

"No, we don't have that ability. Healing is a power of the earth element. We have the powers of air and water elements. We aided her breathing and purified her water... blood. Hopefully that will be enough to allow her to survive and gain strength." Dawn said with hope.

"I heard you speak of Undine and Sylph, what are they?" Orroro asked as the group started walking toward the mansion.

"They are fairies attuned with the natural elements. The Sylph are fairies of the air and are only visible to those who have magical sight, the Undine are the same but of water. They have no substance in the mundane world, but they can influence their own element. With their help, the baby may have a chance." Dawn said quietly, obviously worried about the little girl.

"I think that you have done a good thing tonight." Orroro said speculatively.

"It remains to be seen. When calling on the aid of the Sylph and the Undine there is a price to be paid... we just handed them a blank check." Tara said with a little worry in her voice.

"What type of price might they ask?" Orroro asked tremulously.

"There is no way of knowing. But I believe that this little girl's life is precious enough that any price that they ask will be negligible in comparison. The air tells me that this little girl can be a catalyst for the future world. With her the world will have a greater chance of surviving into the next age." Dawn said with eyes looking into a distant place that only she could see.

"The water gave me a glimpse of her possible future... she was so happy. Everyone around her was filled with wonder at the pure joy that she expressed." Tara said from her own distant place.

"So you can hear voices in the wind and see images in the water? How can this be?" Ororo asked, noticing the reverent, almost holy quality the two women possessed.

"We are in tune with the elements of nature. Dawn can call upon the wind to do her bidding and I can call upon the water. It's magic. It sounds like incredible power but it comes with such a burden of responsibility that we barely use it." Tara said as Dawn continued to stare into the distance.

"How so? I wish to understand." Ororo asked with honest curiosity.

"Let's say I was thirsty. I have the ability to cause a fountain of water to spring up right here before us, but if I were to call upon that water, it might deprive a valley miles from here from receiving the water it needs to nourish and sustain it. Therefore, I only call upon the water when I am reasonably certain that my action will provide more benefit than detriment to the overall system in which we live." Tara said carefully, trying to be sure that she was describing the process accurately.

"I see the wisdom and truth of your philosophy. If there is ever a time you are in need of my ability to augment your own, you have but to ask." Ororo said as they reached the mansion.

"Thank you Ororo." Dawn said solemnly as she went through the door.

"Yes, thank you. If the child survives, you will know that you had a hand in it... we couldn't have done it without your power added to our own." Tara said as she followed Dawn.

Ororo entered the mansion and took the opposite direction from Tara and Dawn in the hallway... she needed time to think.

Chapter 2: Spiral Pathways

Alan was in awe of Andrew's computer skill.

"Are you actually in the hospital's computer?" Alan asked in wonder.

"Sure am, police department's too. It's good to know that some things don't change from universe to universe." Andrew said as his fingers glided over the keyboard.

Alan couldn't help but ask, "How do you know about this stuff?"

"Geeks come in all varieties, I was a computer geek, before I branched out to the other forms of geekdom." Andrew said as he brought up the organ donation listing.

"You're not a geek. I've never thought of you that way." Alan said seriously.

Andrew looked up at Alan with tender eyes and smiled, "I know, that's one of the things I love about you."

"And what are some other things?" Alan asked as he moved in for a kiss.

"Your handsome face, your sense of humor, your fine ass, your huge..."

"Guys? I'm still in the room." Alex interrupted, red-faced.

Both the men looked at Alex and blushed.

Finally Andrew said, "Sorry Alex, we haven't been alone in a while and we're..."

"Horny, I get it. Well, I don't actually *get* it but I understand. I don't have a problem with the guy on guy thing, but I don't want to hear about the bedroom stuff." Alex said plaintively.

"To tell you the truth, there hasn't been any bedroom stuff yet. We'll be spending our first night alone together tonight." Alan said bluntly.

"Oh, so that's why you keep getting off topic. Okay, just finish your research and you can get to it." Alex said and looked back to his computer.

"I've got all the information the computer has to offer on the subject. The name of the donor is Margaret Riley. The official cause of death hasn't been listed yet but I found a police report that said she was in a car accident. And... shit... a drunk driver ran her off the road, her and her husband. Her husband was killed instantly, she survived nearly half an hour before she finally died. And... the drunk driver got a contusion? That means scratch, right? The drunk driver got a scratch on his forehead and on his chin." Andrew finished angrily.

Tara and Dawn walked in to hear Andrew's description of Margaret's death. Tara could sense where their rage was taking them and wanted to guide their focus toward something constructive.

"She was pregnant." Tara said to the three angry men.

"What?" Andrew asked as he stood suddenly.

"Margaret was pregnant, around six or seven months along." Tara said, hoping she could get them to see the priority.

"How? Andrew? Can you find anything about her baby?" Alex asked as he guided/pushed Andrew back to the

computer.

"I'm on it." Andrew said and started looking through the hospital files to find what he wanted.

"Baby Riley, unnamed. Was upgraded from critical to serious condition about five minutes ago." Andrew said and looked up to see the joy and triumph on Dawn and Tara's faces.

"What did you do?" Andrew asked in accusation.

"She was so weak and so tiny that we just gave her a little magical help." Dawn said defensively.

Andrew thought about her answer and broke into a smile. "Good. If I had any kind of healing ability I would have helped you." Andrew said honestly.

"Alan, you know Remy the best of any of us. What do you think should be the priority for us? Focus on the drunk or the baby?" Tara asked.

"If you were asking me what I thought, I would say focus on the baby. But what would Remy think? I think he'd say both. There isn't much more we can do for the baby and there are more than enough of us to deal with both situations... If it comes down to a choice of one or the other, the baby gets top priority." Alan said with certainty.

Tara thought about that and decided that it worked, it had a kind of symmetry that the natural order seemed to favor.

"What should we do about the drunk driver?" Dawn asked, worried by the vigilante vibe she was getting from the group.

Silence fell over the room.

Tara finally said, "I think we should do everything we can to bring this to the attention of the media and drunk driving organizations. If there are any drunk driving bills in the Congress, bring this to their sponsor's attention. Tell them about Margaret Riley's unnamed baby orphaned three months before she should have been born. And when the drunk goes to trial, be sure to have every news agency in the country covering the story so the judge will be compelled to make an example of him."

"That is an excellent idea Tara. It's not what I was thinking at all but it has the benefit of being legal, moral, and has just a hint of vengeance for spice. I like the way you think." Alex said with a friendly glance.

Dawn cast a look at Alex that made the hairs on his neck stand on end. He immediately turned away from Tara and began looking at the computer again.

"We're going to see how Xander is doing. Will you join us when you're done?" Tara asked as she made ready to leave the room.

"Yeah, it'll just be a few minutes." Alan said absently while reading over Andrew's shoulder.

"I'm going to the kitchen to get something to eat. I'll catch up with you guys later." Alex said a moment after Tara and Dawn left the room.

"Okay, we'll probably be in MedLab with Xander." Andrew said and continued looking at his computer.

* * * * *

In the following half-hour Andrew and Alan found the drunk's name, previous arrests for DUI and even a juvenile record that should have been impossible to retrieve. Their

thoughts turned back to Remy and they both decided that they had found all they needed for the time being.

"We need to let Professor Frost know that Remy's in surgery." Alan said as they made their way from the computer room to the MedLab.

As they entered the MedLab they found Xander, Dawn, and Tara sitting silently, waiting.

"Any news?" Alan asked quietly.

"Not a word, they've been in there for over an hour." Xander said with worry.

"Andrew is going to open a portal to let Professor Frost know what's going on. No reason she should be allowed to relax while the rest of us worry." Alan said with a teasing smile.

Xander responded with a weak, tired smile of his own. Andrew took a cleansing breath and cast his mind out to find Professor Frost.

The mansion seemed strangely empty. His mind wandered from the MedLab to the common area and kitchen. When he finally looked into her office, her head jerked up and he heard, //Don't open a portal!//

Her command came with such force that Andrew lost focus and gasped.

"What's the matter love?" Alan asked and put an arm around Andrew.

"Something's wrong. I mean, really wrong. We need to go to the professor's office and phase in to talk to Professor Frost. She warned me not to open a portal." Andrew said as he got up to leave.

Alan stood too and said, "Let's go then."

"I'm coming." Tara said to the men.

"I'll stay with Xander." Dawn said and gave Tara a peck on the cheek before she left.

* * * * *

When the group reached the professor's office, they found him talking quietly with Jean.

"Professor, please excuse the interruption but something's wrong in my universe and we need to phase in and see what it is." Alan said, barely containing his panic.

"Of course." The professor said.

"Could you move from behind the desk? That's where she was when I found her..." Andrew started.

"Understood." The professor said as he moved around the desk.

"Everyone, get in a comfortable spot. When I phase us in, you will need to stay where you are or you could get hurt." Andrew warned.

Andrew sat down and took a cleansing breath as he closed his eyes. When they opened, they cast a golden glow over the room and it shifted to reveal Professor Frost's office.

"I'm glad you came." Professor Frost said sincerely to the group. They could all tell that she was weak. She probably couldn't move from the chair she was sitting in.

"We don't have much time. Three days ago the major governments of the world released a virus into nearly every major city. The virus was designed to seek out the active X-

Gene and destroy the host." She said, having to force the last words to maintain her volume.

"My God." Professor Xavier exclaimed as he began to understand her condition.

"The thing they didn't count on is that the virus mutated... ironic isn't it? A virus designed to kill mutants is itself a mutant." She said then dragged herself back to the point.

"The virus now seeks out the basic genetic marker common to mammals." She said and looked to Professor Xavier to figure it out.

"Everyone?" Charles asked without emotion.

"Correct. By the end of the week, the last of us will be dead. I have been holding on, hoping that I could tell you something important Scott." She said to Alan with pleading eyes.

"I'm listening." Alan said and held her gaze.

"Scott, Andrew, you have my blessing and best wishes for your union. I was a self-righteous bitch to withhold my blessing because I didn't know Andrew. You're a good person Scott, I trust you and your judgment. You obviously love Andrew, that's all I need to know. I felt it was important that you knew... and take care of Remy for me... you two are all that's left of our world." Professor Frost said and tears began to streak down her face.

"Can you tell me anything about the virus? Is there any treatment?" Professor Xavier asked quickly.

"Charles Xavier, I never thought I would see the day..." She trailed off, then looked up as if she just remembered where she was.

"As my last act for the benefit of mankind I'm giving you all my knowledge of this virus, in hopes that we can prevent the same thing from happening in your world." Professor Frost said and focused on Professor Xavier.

After a moment of concentration Professor Xavier said, "I have it. I will study what you have given me, try to develop an anti-viral agent to defend against it, and pray I never have occasion to use it."

"Professor Frost... Emma, Remy is in surgery now, the doctor is implanting new eyes as we speak." Alan said, trying to find some way to make her feel better.

"Good. I'm glad to know that he's in good hands. Remy is a very special man, he lives on the edge of two worlds but doesn't feel a part of either. It's a very lonely life, I hope he can find happiness one day." She said wistfully.

"He has friends and support here. We'll take good care of him." Andrew said, only just noticing the tears falling from his own eyes.

"I promise that I will do my best to protect both Scott and Remy. Whatever they need, they will have." Professor Xavier vowed.

"Scott, would you take a message to my other self?" Professor Frost asked in a pleading voice.

"Of course, what do you want me to tell her?" Alan asked in a panic, he could see the life draining from her.

"Tell her that until my last hours, I performed my duties faithfully... and my duties left me to die alone." She said and closed her eyes.

"Emma, you're not alone. Even though we can't touch you. We are here with you." Alan said sincerely with tears streaming down his face.

"Yes Emma, you are among friends." Professor Xavier said with a brave smile.

Emma opened her eyes and looked at Alan, "Mourn my death if you need to but I prefer that you celebrate my life. That is the best honor you could give to me... I never celebrated my own."

Those were to be the last words uttered by Professor Emma Frost.

After long, unchanging moments watching Professor Frost not moving, not breathing, Andrew closed his eyes and the office faded back to its original state. Andrew pulled Alan close and both cried, unashamedly. Tara and Jean were clinging to each other, both overwhelmed by the scene they had just witnessed.

Professor Xavier made his way back around his desk and said, "What an amazing woman, I am sorry that I never got to know her."

"Will each of you speak at the memorial service that I will have in her honor? It doesn't have to be a long speech, just a few words if that's all you have. I want to grant her last wish and celebrate her life. The best way I can do that is by letting everyone know why she was special to me." Alan said to the group.

"I think I can speak for everyone here when I say that just now she changed all our lives." Professor Xavier said with certainty.

Agreement spread through the group and without saying any more, they left the office to seek peace wherever they might find it.

Chapter 3: Silver Linings and Lead Balloons

Alan and Andrew walked from the professor's office and ended up outside the door of their old bedroom.

"We can't go in there, that's Jean's room now." Andrew said quietly and led him away from the door.

Alan followed obediently, only half knowing where he was.

Andrew opened a portal into their bedroom. He led Alan to the bed and sat him on the edge.

He pulled off Alan's shoes and guided him to lay back on the bed. Andrew removed his own shoes and climbed on the bed beside Alan. With a little coaxing, he shifted Alan's head onto his chest.

{Go ahead and cry. It's okay...} Andrew whispered as he began stroking Alan's hair.

Alan fought it for a moment, then finally let loose a sob.

"Go ahead. I've got you. Hold on to me, you're not alone." Andrew crooned and continued the stroking.

Alan finally gave up the last of his control and began to weep in earnest. He let loose great heaving sobs as Andrew held him close and silently wept.

* * * * *

Tara made her way down to the MedLab and Dawn.

Dawn saw the look of despair on Tara's face and immediately ran to comfort her.

"They're all dead... everyone in Alan and Remy's world. I... I saw Professor Frost die." Tara said, then broke down in uncontrollable crying.

Xander sat in shock at the words. He saw the devastation that Tara was feeling and didn't want to interrupt her grief, but he couldn't help himself, he had to know, "How is Alan?"

"He... he's with Andrew. Oh Goddess, they let loose a plague... to kill all the mutants... and it killed everyone." Tara said between sobs.

Xander thought about Remy and Alan and finally came to a decision.

"Dawn, take Tara to your room. She doesn't need to be here now. I'll wait for Remy." Xander said quietly.

Dawn needed no further bidding, she gathered Tara close to her and they awkwardly made their way to the door.

* * * * *

Jean waited for a few moments before saying anything.

"Professor? How bad is it? I mean what she showed you." Jean asked with a shaky voice.

"Bad. What they did is within the abilities of our own technology." The professor said with worry evident in his voice.

"Can we defend against it?" Jean asked with hope.

"No. At least I don't see any way of doing so. This virus was engineered to seek out and attack the X-Gene. But when it is activated it has properties of AIDS, cancer and Ebola, to name a few. The designers of this virus didn't only want to

kill their victims, they wanted them to suffer the most horrible death imaginable." The professor said with despair.

"What are we going to do?" Jean asked, hoping there was something.

"We will go to the MedLab and begin to map out the genetic structure, communicability level, transmission vector, and possible effectiveness of anti-viral agents." Professor Xavier said as he gathered some things into his lap to take with him.

"Would you like some help?" Jean asked hopefully.

"Of course Doctor Grey. I intend to enlist you and Doctor McCoy for this crusade." Professor Xavier said as he started for the door.

"You know Doctor McCoy is in surgery right now?" Jean asked, noticing how intent the professor was on his mission.

"He can join us after. We will be working in the biochemistry lab." The professor said as he exited the room.

Jean hurried to follow.

* * * * *

Alan finally quieted and just lay in Andrew's arms, feeling the comfort.

Alan broke the silence by asking, "You know I love you, right?"

Andrew smiled and said, "Yes, you tell me every day. But even if you never said it, I can tell by everything you say and everything you do. It's scary to have someone love me so much when no one ever did before."

"Scott loves you." Alan said as a statement of fact.

"I was talking about before I came here. But yeah, he does... in his way. And I love him too. But we were never meant to have romantic love, we both knew that from the beginning. When we became a couple, we agreed that there would be no sex, just the closeness and cuddling." Andrew said as he adjusted his position to be more comfortable.

"And what do we have?" Alan asked bravely.

Andrew could feel Alan tense with the asking of the question.

"We have this." Andrew said and pulled Alan into a deep kiss.

* * * * *

Dawn comforted Tara until she finally fell into an exhausted sleep. Dawn thought about the things Tara had told her, the horror of what had just happened in the next world over and a shiver went up her spine.

[There has to be a way of preventing this from happening in this world.] She thought while continuing to hold Tara close. [We wouldn't have been given a pathway into that world and been allowed to see its destruction if there weren't something we could do to prevent the same thing from happening here. The professor will no doubt focus on the virus... we need for someone to focus on the men who created it.]

Dawn realized that she had the beginnings of a plan, and that it was too big for her to accomplish by herself. She began to think and decided that she had some of the best resources available anywhere in this world.

"Tara honey, I need for you to wake up." She said quietly, not wanting to startle Tara any more than necessary.

"Dawn?" Tara asked weakly.

"Yeah, I know you're tired, but we have things to do." Dawn said with quiet determination.

Tara came to full wakefulness at the tone in Dawn's voice.

"I'm going to get Ororo to get the other adults who aren't busy. I need for you to get the senior student X-Men. We are going to meet in the dining room in half an hour." Dawn said and got off the bed.

"What are we going to do?" Tara asked as she got up and straightened her outfit.

"Fight back."

* * * * *

Andrew finally broke the kiss, pulled away from Alan, and took in a deep breath. He began to unbutton Alan's shirt and pulled it open.

Alan closed his eyes and began to take off his glasses.

{Don't.} Andrew whispered.

"What?" Alan asked and put his glasses back on.

"Don't take off your glasses. I know you just want to be comfortable and don't want to take the chance that they will be knocked off, but it's my own insecurity coming out. It's like making me wear a paper bag over my head." Andrew said and turned away from Alan.

"Oh love, I never even thought of that." Alan said and turned Andrew to face him.

Andrew fought him for a moment before looking him in the face.

"You are so beautiful to me. I don't know why you would even think that, but I promise that I'll leave the glasses on. But just so you know, when I take them off, I only see you... I'm not imagining that I'm with someone else." Alan said honestly.

"Not even Gene?" Andrew asked and pulled back to get a better view of Alan's reaction.

Alan stopped for a moment at the invocation of Gene's name and thought about how to put his feelings into words.

"I loved Gene. He was the center of my life, my source, my foundation, my everything. When he died, there was nothing left of me. Everything that I was died with him." He said carefully.

Andrew rested back on an elbow and nodded, prompting Alan to continue.

"I love you too, but not the same way. With you... I'm me. You've helped me to become myself. I love the person who you are, but when I'm not with you, I don't feel the... lost feeling... I did when I was separated from Gene. I'm still me. I don't know if that makes any sense, but it's the best I can do to put my feelings into words." Alan said somberly.

"It makes perfect sense. But I need to know how you feel about Gene now." Andrew said, not demanding, just asking.

"I loved Gene. He was exactly what I needed when I was young and insecure. He made me feel important and loved. But that chapter of my life is closed... ended. Our

relationship was unchanging, I was unchanging. Now I am... more... different..." Alan said, having difficulty finding the words.

"You've grown?" Andrew suggested.

"Exactly, I'm becoming the man I was intended to be, instead of being the terrified kid who needed constant guidance and reassurance." Alan said triumphantly.

"You were happy while you were with Gene." Andrew said cautiously.

"But it was like a trap. I didn't even know I was in it, but while Gene was feeding my emotional need and basically thinking for me, I didn't have to do anything for myself. So I would never become anything more than I was while I was with him." Alan said in realization.

Andrew nodded in understanding.

"And if Gene were to show up right now, I'd choose you in a heartbeat. Now I know why I was so enthralled with him, it wasn't as much love as dependence." Alan said in wonder.

"And you don't have that with me?" Andrew asked, wanting to be sure.

"No, you and I are each independent people. If you need to go back to your universe to deal with something for a few weeks, I'll miss you, but I won't be lost without you. God! It all makes so much sense now." Alan said, lost in his thoughts.

"You know, I love the man that you've become. And I love you just the way you are." Andrew said as he snuggled against Alan.

"And if I change? Grow? Will you still love me then?" Alan asked with some serious worry.

"We'll both grow, hopefully together. I'll do everything I can to keep up with your changes and be the perfect man for each you that you grow into. But be careful, remember, you *do* have the dickhead gene in your family... on Buffy's side as I recall." Andrew ended in a smile.

"Yeah, I gotta watch out for that." Alan said with an answering smile, then turned serious again. "We need to talk about your insecurity about this relationship. I can tell you I love you and you're beautiful a thousand times a day if that's what you need to hear. But I would rather you tell me what the problem is and let me help you overcome it." Alan said quietly.

Andrew was surprised by having the tables turned on him so effectively but decided that this needed to be dealt with and said, "I guess it's a lot of things that add up to me feeling worthless and ugly."

"Things?" Alan prompted and lay down, pulling Andrew to lay beside him.

"My dad left me when I was five, my mom left when I was fifteen. Since then, the friends I hung around with couldn't have cared less if I stayed or left." Andrew said, staring off into the distance.

"But that's all changed now that you're here, right?" Alan asked carefully.

"Yeah, but I still feel it. Like I'm not worth anything, no one could want to stay with me, that I'm ugly, plain, goofy, a geek..." {less than shit.} Andrew ended in a whisper.

"Andy, you need to tell me how to help you with this. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. I've honestly found you

attractive from the moment I first met you. I didn't know you before... the Andrew I know is brave, smart, handsome, loving, and the man I want to become my partner for the rest of my life. As my partner, I expect you to be my equal... which means that if you're less than shit, so am I." Alan said sincerely.

"I can think of one thing that you can do to convince me." Andrew said shyly.

"Anything." Alan said immediately.

"Make love to me. You know I can read you like a book. If you make love to me, I'll know within me how you really feel." Andrew said honestly.

"Oh Andy, come here." Alan said with relief.

"You're not worried?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"Not even a little bit. If you'll be looking at my reactions to you... then you're about to know what it feels like to be loved." Alan said with a joyful smile.

* * * * *

"I thought everyone would be down here waiting with you." Alex said as he walked in to find Xander staring off into space.

"Alan was going to talk to Professor Frost, the one from his home dimension." Xander said tiredly and looked at Alex.

"Okay." Alex said, getting worried by the dark tone in Xander's voice.

"I don't know everything, but apparently, someone in Alan's dimension released a virus that was supposed to kill all the

mutants..." Xander said, trying to find the words to say it calmly.

"Oh God no." Alex gasped, his mind filling with the images of everyone Alan and Remy had talked about earlier in the night, all being dead.

"The virus mutated... and killed everyone." Xander finished, not betraying his emotions.

"Everyone?"

"That's what Tara said. She also said that they saw Professor Frost die right in front of them." Xander said with a hitch in his breath.

"Scott went to talk to Artie and Clarissa, they've grown attached to Remy and he didn't want them to worry if they found out he was in MedLab. I think he needs to know." Xander said, trying to keep the tear from falling from his eye.

"I'll go find him. How are you doing?" Alex asked quietly.

"I'll be fine... until I have to tell Remy that everyone he ever knew is dead." Xander said with anguish.

"Wait on that, at least till you've talked to the professor and Alan. You have one person's slant on the facts, there may be more to the story." Alex said and turned to leave.

"Thanks Alex. I hadn't thought of that. Go on and find Scott, I have a feeling that Alan is going to need his family tonight more than ever." Xander said tiredly.

Alex nodded and left.

* * * * *

"Hello Alex, I take it from the look on your face that you've heard." The professor said as they met at the elevator.

"Yeah, Xander just told me. Can you give me the facts? I'm going to go find Scott." Alex said as he walked with the professor and Jean back toward the MedLab.

"Step inside and I'll tell you and Xander together." The professor said quietly.

Alex walked back into the waiting area to find Xander crying. At the sound of his entry, Xander hurriedly wiped the tears from his eye with the back of his hand and sniffed inelegantly.

"The professor said he would tell us the whole story." Alex said and turned to look at the professor, pretending not to notice Xander crying.

"The facts as I know them are, the major governments of the world released a virus into the cities for the express purpose of exterminating all active mutants. The virus mutated and became lethal to everyone." The professor said tiredly.

"The last of those infected will be dead before the end of the week. Even though there are technically some survivors... they will not be enough to perpetuate the species."

"So everyone Alan and Remy knew is dead?" Alex asked, stunned.

"Yes, except Logan, and the virus affected him so strongly that he has lost the ability to reason, he is little more than an animal. Professor Frost hoped that if he finally triumphed over the disease, he might one day come back to himself... from her preliminary work, I can't say that I'm optimistic for him. His healing factor is fighting the disease, but... it's

tearing him apart, healing him, exploding his internal organs, healing again... an endless cycle of torture." The professor said and allowed a tear to fall.

"Is there any hope of helping him?" Jean asked in horror.

"If we can develop some kind of anti-virus... perhaps. But that is a very remote possibility at this stage." The professor said weakly.

"Tara said that you saw Professor Frost die... How did Alan take it?" Xander asked with deep concern.

"He was in shock when he left my office... we all were. He is with Andrew right now and..." The professor trailed off, getting a vacant look in his eyes.

"And?" Alex asked in worry for his newest brother.

"... And Andrew is comforting him." The professor said, trying to hide his blush.

"Then I'm going to get Scott and Dawn so we can be there when Alan needs us. He has to know that he has a family that cares for him." Alex said with certainty.

"Just check with me before you go to the boathouse. I wouldn't want you to interrupt them while they're... grieving." The professor choked out.

Alex nodded and left the room to find his siblings.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Xander asked with hope.

"You're doing it Mr. Harris. You are the only one who has connected with Remy since he came to this universe." The professor said and motioned for Jean to follow him.

"Let me know if there is anything more I can do." Xander asked with a pleading tone.

"Of course." The professor said as he and Jean left the room.

Chapter 4: Rebuilding Dreams

Andrew finished removing Alan's shirt and proceeded to his pants when Alan stopped him.

"Love, I need to tell you something before we start." Alan said and pulled Andrew close to him.

"What?"

"As nice as it is to be spontaneous, I think that this first time I'll let you know what to expect before we do anything. That should make things a little more comfortable later on." Alan said carefully.

"Okay."

Alan pulled back to look into Andrew's eyes to see the hint of anxiety that he expected. He stroked Andrew's hair and said, "To start with, I'm going to bring you pleasure, I know that you'll want to do the same for me, but this first time, let me take the lead and show you what I enjoy."

Andrew nodded and Alan continued, "I need for you to tell me if you don't like something that I'm doing. Next time, you can try whatever you want with me and I'll do the same for you."

"That sounds good to me." Andrew said with a smile.

"We aren't going to do everything this time because... Love, you're a virgin, you need to be stretched and no matter how careful I am, it would cause you pain if I tried to... penetrate you tonight. I never want to cause you pain if I can prevent it."

"So we're not going to...?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"I'm not a virgin, I'm going to prepare you, to show you how it's done, then you're going to prepare me and fuck me." Alan said calmly.

A shiver ran through Andrew's body that Alan noticed. After a gentle kiss Alan asked, "Enough talk?"

"Enough talk." Andrew said with a smile and moved his hand to Alan's zipper.

* * * * *

Dawn went to the front of the dining room and the room quieted.

"Thank you all for coming. I just wanted to fill everyone in on what I know, and find out if anyone has any ideas about what we should do." Dawn said to the group.

Ororo stood and asked, "Are you proposing we take action without the professor's sanction?"

"No, I'm proposing that we pool our knowledge and discuss the alternatives. Then we... I can approach the professor with what we've come up with and present him with a list of options rather than a list of questions." Dawn said calmly.

Ororo nodded in acceptance and sat down.

Dawn began to tell the story of what happened in Alan's home dimension. When she finished, Tara interjected a few points and Alex relayed what he had learned from the professor.

Somehow the subject of Margaret Riley's baby came up and the whole story was revealed by Tara, Alex, and Dawn, with the occasional interjection by Scott. There was an air of agreement that they would all help the baby however they could and equal agreement that they would do all they

could to make all drunks think twice before getting behind the wheel of a car.

"So vat do you zink we should do about the virus?" Kurt asked loudly, dragging the group back to the topic at hand.

"I thought we should go after the people who would develop such a thing and... prevent them... somehow. That's why I need your help, I'm not familiar with what resources you have to accomplish this." Dawn said with a little helpless tone to her voice.

"It is a very good idea. Among all of us, I'm sure we can come up with something that the professor will approve of." Peter said before his inherent shyness shut him up.

There was a murmur of agreement that went through the crowd and the discussion began to flow.

* * * * *

The door of the surgical area opened and Hank walked out, obviously exhausted.

"How did it go?" Xander asked as he jumped up from his seat.

"Everything went as expected. We will not know if the surgery was a success for some days yet, but there were no complications with the transplants." Hank said professionally.

"So what do we do now?" Xander asked with coiled tension.

"We wait. You will be able to go in and see Mr. LeBeau in a few minutes. Do not be shocked by the way he is restrained in the bed, it is necessary for his head to be kept completely still for the next twenty-four hours. His head is fixed into a device called a halo, sometimes used to

immobilize people with neck injuries. Although it looks like a torture device, it simply holds Mr. LeBeau's head completely still." Hank said seriously.

"When will he wake up?" Xander asked quietly.

"He is heavily sedated into a near coma to minimize the possibility of eye movement during his sleep. Tomorrow about this time I will reduce the sedation until he achieves a natural sleep. I should think... day after tomorrow, in the morning will be the soonest that he could be expected to wake.

"Can I see him?" Xander asked with anxiety.

"Yes, but be very careful not to jar his bed. You may take his hand if you wish but do not touch his face or lean on his bed at all. Every movement jeopardizes the possibility of him being able to see." Hank said and opened the door to welcome Xander into the surgical area.

"You're not putting him into a private room like you did for Jean?" Xander asked.

"No, he cannot be moved, he will remain in this bed for at least a week." Hank said.

"A week of bedrest? I should have known." Xander said with a tired smile.

Hank just rolled his eyes and left the room.

Xander went to the chair that was conveniently beside the bed and sat.

He took Remy's hand into his own and said, "Don't worry Cajun. Everything's going to be fine."

* * * * *

After Andrew had finished revealing all the flesh of his lover, Alan began to unwrap his own present.

With torturous slowness he removed each article of Andrew's clothing with reverence and awe. Each bit of exposed flesh was slowly explored with hands, mouth, and tongue.

Andrew writhed with pleasure as Alan began to suckle his left nipple. He gasped as Alan gently tugged the pink nub with his teeth before moving to the right one to give it equal attention.

Alan moved down Andrew's body and began to tongue his navel. Andrew began to laugh and pulled away. "Stop it, that tickles." Andrew said and playfully slapped Alan on the shoulder.

Alan moved lower and began to nuzzle the insides of Andrew's thighs.

"Unngh, that's good." Andrew said as his eyes rolled up in pleasure.

"Let me know what you think of this bit." Alan said and moved to the perineum.

Andrew let out a sigh of pleasure then a gasp as Alan nipped him playfully.

Finally, Alan moved to the scrotum and took one of Andrew's balls gently into his mouth. Andrew's penis jerked and for a moment Alan thought he had had an orgasm from just this sensation.

Undeterred, Alan gave the other ball equal attention, then moved up to Andrew's painfully erect cock.

He just looked at the organ for a moment and considered where to start. Finally he took just the head into his mouth and slowly licked around the rim of the glans.

In response, Andrew nearly bucked him off the bed.

Alan pulled off the cock and gently blew cool air across the moistened head. Andrew let out an indescribable sound that was somehow both a gasp and a moan.

With deliberate slowness, Alan went back to the cock and began to suck it into his mouth. After a gasp from Andrew, he continued until he had taken the entire length.

Alan felt Andrew's hands in his hair, not forcing, just holding. He moved to the tip, then back to the root. As Alan started a rhythm, Andrew released his head and took hold of the sheets of the bed, balling them into his fists.

Andrew's balls pulled up and Alan knew that it wouldn't be much longer. He increased the rhythm and force of his sucking and brought Andrew to completion. The groan of pleasure that Andrew loosed at the height of his orgasm made Alan wonder about what their roommates would be thinking when they heard it. The sound would be easily heard throughout the house.

Alan climbed up the bed and took Andrew into his arms. He was concerned to find Andrew trembling, but at the look of peaceful contentment on his face, Alan let loose his worry and moved in for a gentle kiss.

{That was... oh Gods... I never...} Andrew said in a whisper.

"Yeah, and if you liked that, you'll love the next part." Alan said with a serene smile.

Andrew nuzzled against Alan's chest and said, "I love you so much. I'm so glad my first time could be with you."

"Me too." Alan said contentedly and moved in for another, deeper kiss.

Andrew was surprised at Alan's taste and realized that he tasted himself in Alan's mouth.

Alan pulled out of the kiss and looked down to Andrew's renewed erection and said, "Looks like you're ready to go again."

A shudder ran through Andrew's body as Alan dragged his fingertips down Andrew's chest and toward his engorged member.

* * * * *

Dawn made her way down the elevator and to the MedLab's biochemistry room to find the professor.

"Where is Professor Xavier?" She asked Jean.

"He went to Cerebro to check on some things. What did you need?" Jean asked while continuing what she was doing on the computer.

"I just needed to talk to him about some stuff." Dawn said absently, thinking about what to do next.

"Just call to him in your mind. Make sure that you call him gently, Cerebro enhances his mental abilities and a loud call can cause him pain." Jean said and wrote something down on a notepad.

Dawn nodded and took a seat.

//Professor? Can you hear me?//

//Yes Ms. Summers, what can I do for you?// The professor responded immediately.

Dawn outlined the events of the meeting and the suggestions that the group had come up with.

//That was very resourceful of you. If it were two weeks ago, your efforts might have been rewarded. However, I have just discovered that

those scientists that you were worried about have already developed the virus and are in the process of implementing the distribution of the agent to the major cities of the world.// The professor communicated with an undercurrent of fear.

//Are we too late?// Dawn asked with a tremble of her own fear coming across the link.

//For your plan to work... yes. To stop this... maybe not. We will need to take decisive action. Go to the group in the dining hall and tell them to prepare for visitors. We are going to need help to attempt something on this scale. I will join you there in half an hour. There are some matters I must attend to immediately.// The professor sent with serious intent.

//What are we going to do?// Dawn asked quietly.

//Get them before they get us.// The professor said with finality and let the link go quiet.

Chapter 5: Friends, Lovers and Others

After moving Andrew to his side and positioning him with one leg forward, Alan took his lubricated index finger and gently moved around Andrew's most private opening. He waited for Andrew to get used to the sensation before he gently pressed his finger over the opening and rubbed in a slow massaging motion.

"Just relax love. Let me know if you want me to stop at any time and I will. I'm lubricating and relaxing you. Notice that I'm going slowly, allowing you to adjust to each sensation before I move on." Alan said with a disturbingly professional tone.

"Keep going, it feels nice." Andrew said as he relaxed.

"Good, now I'm putting my finger in, just a little bit to loosen you. It's like I'm massaging your hole." Alan said and suited actions to words.

Andrew flinched a little and let out an 'umph' before relaxing again into the sensation.

"Okay, now that I've made it past the first sphincter, I'm going to move to the second, just inside."

Andrew remained relaxed this time as Alan made his way deeper into the tight orifice.

"How you doing?" Alan asked quietly, keeping the rhythm of his massage.

"Fine, it feels a little weird, but nice." Andrew said as he savored the experience of this new sensation.

"Good, now I'm going to move my finger in a little deeper... all you should feel is a little stretching and I'll go slow." Alan

said and added more lubricant to his finger before moving deeper.

"Ooooookay. That just feels weird." Andrew said in a gasp.

"But not bad?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"No, not bad, but... strange." Andrew said and tried to relax again.

"Good. Now hold on, I'm about to show you one of my favorite things... you might want to grab on to something." Alan said with a smile in his voice.

Andrew grabbed onto the headboard, feeling anxious at the vague statement.

Alan moved his finger and found the little bump that was Andrew's prostate.

"Fuck!" Andrew gasped as Alan began to massage the protrusion.

"One more thing, then it's your turn." Alan said and began a deliberate fucking motion with his finger.

Andrew began to moan in a ululating tone.

Alan could tell that Andrew was nearing his climax and reluctantly stopped his motion.

"Why did you stop?" Andrew asked in protest.

"Because it's your turn. I've just prepared you, the only difference is that I would have done the same thing with two, then three fingers before I entered you with my penis. Now it's your turn to prepare me." Alan said peacefully.

With a little exasperation at the abrupt halt to the wondrous sensations he was experiencing Andrew turned and found Alan laying face down, spread eagle on the bed.

"I think it will be easiest for you this way, hand me those pillows." Alan said.

After receiving the pillows, Alan placed them under his midsection, forcing his ass into the air.

Andrew hesitantly took the lubrication and began to mimic the actions that Alan had performed on him.

Slowly and deliberately he went through the steps that Alan had shown him until he was making massaging movements deep into Alan's lubricated hole.

"Okay, now lube up two fingers and do the same thing... slowly." Alan said and relaxed into the sensation.

Andrew obeyed and was surprised at the way the opening stretched to accommodate his invading digits. After a few minutes of gentle probing Alan finally said, "It's time for three now."

Andrew hesitantly lubed up three fingers and began the process again. He was fascinated by the stretched opening accepting his three fingers. Long minutes later Alan finally said, "Okay, now lube yourself up, just go slow when you enter."

Andrew put the lube on his cock and noticed that his hands were shaking with the anticipation of this most intimate act.

He slowly moved into position and pressed the head of his cock against the somewhat dilated opening before him.

"Slow, steady pressure." Alan said and braced himself against the pressure to come.

Andrew pushed against the opening slowly and finally gained entrance.

"That's it, give me a few seconds to adjust to you then start pushing again, slow and steady." Alan said with a little strain in his voice.

Andrew was fighting the impulse to hump like a dog and followed Alan's instructions.

Alan finally said, "Okay, now you're fully in. You can get moving now, as slow or fast as you want."

Andrew moved tentatively. He still felt that he might hurt Alan if he moved too quickly or forcefully but as he began to experiment with different speed and force he could tell that Alan was enjoying it.

Andrew scooted his knees forward slightly for more comfort and on his next thrust he felt Alan shudder.

"Oh Gods, did I hurt you?" Andrew asked as he froze in horror.

"No, you know that spot that I touched inside you? You just touched mine... Please... MOVE." Alan said, trying to remain calm.

Andrew understood and began moving again.

After a few experimental thrusts he found the spot again as evidenced by Alan's shudder.

"Oh God love, just like that!" Alan gasped.

Andrew could hear the desperate passion in Alan's voice and feel the coiled tension in his body as he approached orgasm.

The rhythm quickened and became more forceful until Alan moaned.

At the onset of Alan's orgasm, he tightened on Andrew's thrusting member. This increased pressure was enough to push Andrew over the edge.

For a blissful moment, the two were lost in the repeated spasms of ecstasy before Andrew finally collapsed across Alan's back.

Long silent minutes passed... maybe hours...

Finally Alan said, "Gotta move love, you're heavier than you look."

"Can't." Andrew said.

"I'm laying in a puddle of cum." Alan said, not making a move either.

"I just want to stay like this forever." Andrew said and kissed Alan's neck.

"I'm okay with it, but the others might object." Alan said in a considering voice.

Andrew started to laugh and finally moved off Alan's back. When he withdrew from Alan, they both felt a sense of loss.

Andrew moved beside Alan and pulled him into a deep kiss.

Finally the kiss broke and Alan asked, "Now do you believe that I love you and find you attractive?"

"Without a doubt."

* * * * *

"I'm here Charles. If this means what I think, we must act immediately." Magneto said as he stormed into Professor Xavier's office, holding a stack of documents.

"Yes Eric, I agree completely." Professor Xavier said firmly.

Mystique was taken by surprise by the professor's response. "You agree?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Yes Raven. Though I am reluctant to take life, I will do it in defense of even more life... or in this case, all life." The professor said tiredly.

"Since we agree, we should get started." Magneto said, towering over Charles, trying to take command.

"Soon Eric. There is more to this than you know. We will need more help." Professor Xavier said vaguely.

"What do we do in the mean-time?" Eric asked impatiently.

"I will take you to the biochemistry lab to show you our preliminary results, then we will have a meeting in the dining room. Your... followers... are welcomed here. We have prepared rooms for them if they would like to rest before the coming battle. If you go to the dining room, Scott will see to your accommodations." The professor said to Mystique before turning to leave the room.

"See to it." Magneto said to Mystique before following Professor Xavier out of the room.

* * * * *

"John?" Bobby said quietly when Magneto's group entered the dining room.

"Yeah?" John answered in undisguised irritation.

"Would you talk with me for a minute?" Bobby asked hesitantly.

"Sure, why not." Pyro said with hostility in his voice.

Bobby quietly led the way out of the dining room and toward the stairs.

John realized where Bobby was taking him and said, "Somewhere else. Not there."

Bobby was confused about why John wouldn't want to go to his room where they had spent so much time together, but shrugged and led John outside and down to some rocks.

"Why did you leave?" Bobby asked bluntly.

"Why do you think?" John asked with a sneer.

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking." Bobby said in true confusion.

"You really don't have a clue? Talk about self-absorbed." John said while shaking his head in wonder. He got up off his rock to pace.

"Tell me, was it something I did?" Bobby asked in a begging tone.

John stopped in his tracks and looked at Bobby's confused expression and was filled with renewed anger.

"Let's see. We were having sex together for what? Two and a half years? And you would never tell anyone. You treated me like your personal whore and when you were done with me, you didn't even have the decency to break up with me. You just acted like it never happened." John spat with hatred.

"We were just messing around... it didn't mean anything."
Bobby said in a whine.

"Fuck Bobby. Do you hear yourself? It didn't mean anything to you, but to me it meant everything. You know what kind of childhood I had. I just wanted to be loved, and I thought that you loved me..." {I know I loved you.} John finished in a whisper.

"Really?" Bobby asked, just beginning to grasp what John was talking about.

"Jesus Christ! You never even thought about it. I was nothing to you. I was a cum bucket that you could squeeze off a load into when the mood struck, then ignore when you were done." John screamed with fury.

"It wasn't like that... it was just fun." Bobby said weakly.

"Then Marie shows up and you cut me off like I'd never touched you before. I didn't exist. I thought we were friends, but from the day she showed up, you treated me like a stranger."

"Please don't be mad at her, she didn't have anything to do with this." Bobby said defensively.

John stood in shock as he heard Bobby defend Marie.

"You unbelievable bastard." John exclaimed in wonder.

Bobby thought that John was disagreeing with his statement and said in explanation, "Marie and I can't even touch. We're a couple in a different way. It's hard to explain."

John was surprised to find that his eyes could open even wider in shock at the obliviousness of his former supposed friend.

"That different way you're talking about, I suppose it's like sharing your thoughts and feelings. Stuff like that?" John asked in a half-daze.

"Yeah." Bobby said shyly.

"Bobby... that's what I wanted. The sex was never the point, it was just the closest thing I could find to what I really wanted. Physical closeness is better than being totally alone." John said in desperation and noticed the veil of cluelessness fall over Bobby's features again.

"I don't..." Bobby began to say in confusion.

"...I know, and I guess you never will. Well now I know that I made the right decision. I only hope that someday you'll have a lover treat you as inconsiderately as you've treated me. And in the instant that the pain comes crashing down on you, as you realize that you were used, and made a fool of, that you will think of me and remember." John said and walked back to the mansion.

[I wonder what got him so pissed off? We were just kids messing around.] Bobby thought before following John inside.

* * * * *

After a leisurely shower together, Andrew opened a portal to the mansion, outside the dining room where he sensed a large group of people.

As they both stepped into the room, conversation stopped.

"What?" Andrew asked defensively and looked quickly at Alan, then down to his zipper.

"Some more things have happened, these are some of Magneto's people." Marie said quietly, speaking the name

Magneto as if it were a curse.

"Who?" Alan and Andrew asked simultaneously.

Before Marie could answer Andrew said, "Remy?" and made his way across the room toward the familiar figure.

"Who wants to know?" Gambit asked suspiciously.

"Andrew, this isn't the Remy that you know... He's the one from this universe, he came here with Magneto." Ororo explained quietly.

Remy cast a confused look at Ororo.

"Later, when we have more time I will explain." Ororo said quietly to Remy.

"Nice to meet you Remy. I'm Andrew..." Andrew said slowly and offered his hand.

"Whatever you be sellin, Remy not be buyin." Gambit interrupted and walked away.

"Evil twin?" Alan asked Ororo and Andrew.

"Look who's talking." Andrew said with a teasing smile to take any sting out of the words.

"Are you saying I'm the evil twin? I thought it was Scott!" Alan said with mock worry.

"Since he broke up with me to be with Jean, I guess Scott **is** the evil twin." Andrew said with assurance.

"I thought so, he just has that look about him, ya know?" Alan said playfully and received a kiss from Andrew before returning his attention to the people around them.

"So what's been going on? And who's this Magneto guy that Marie was talking about?" Alan asked Ororo quietly.

"I would love to explain, but I must catch up with Remy. He is like a bomb, on the verge of explosion unless someone is around him to diffuse the conversation." Ororo said hurriedly and left to find him again.

"I'm glad our Remy isn't like that." Andrew said and noticed another new face.

He made his way over to the new guy and said a little less enthusiastically than before, "Hello, I'm Andrew." And offered his hand.

The young man looked at Andrew appraisingly for a moment, then said, "Lance, you can call me Avalanche." He said and made no move to shake hands.

"What's going on? We just got here." Andrew asked, hoping to strike up conversation.

"Dunno. My boss an your boss are talkin. Rest of us are waitin." Lance said with an unconcerned shrug and walked away.

"Friendly bunch, aren't they?" Alan asked Andrew quietly.

"Yeah, I'm not even going to try and talk to the naked blue woman over there. If she's as friendly as the others, I'll be lucky to get away with my balls attached." Andrew said half-seriously.

{And I like them just the way they are.} Alan whispered into Andrew's ear, then gave him a little kiss on the lobe.

Andrew heard a chuckle and noticed Logan standing against the wall by himself. At Andrew's questioning look, Logan tapped his nose and gave a knowing smile.

Andrew blushed all the way down to his toes when he realized what Logan meant.

* * * * *

After ten minutes of talking with various people in the room, the door opened and the room fell silent again.

"Emma!" Alan said with a joyful smile.

Emma made her way across the room and said, "It is a rare occasion when someone greets me so happily. It is good to see you again Alan. Are you well?"

Alan looked at Andrew and raised an eyebrow in question.

"Go ahead." Andrew said, knowing that Alan wanted to share his thoughts and feelings with this replica of his dear friend.

"Look into my mind and see." Alan said with a serene smile.

Emma was shocked again by Alan's willingness to be scanned, then reached up to touch him gently on the temple.

"Good heavens." She said in wonder as she felt the love and contentment that Andrew and Alan had experienced. Then she found the memory of her other self dying and gasped, "Dear God."

"Yeah. I think her message to you was a warning." Andrew said quietly.

"Yes. And if we survive the coming days, I plan to heed that warning immediately... and celebrate my life." She finished quietly.

"Then her memory has been honored." Alan said with a happy smile.

Emma got a distant look then said, "Charles is calling me. The meeting will start in a few minutes."

Alan and Andrew followed Emma with their eyes as she left the room.

"No matter which universe..." Alan began to say.

"...Yeah, she's an amazing woman." Andrew said, knowing Alan's thought without words.

Chapter 6: A Trilogy of Nightmares

Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Emma Frost entered the room, all looking grim and determined.

"Everyone, may I have your attention." Professor Xavier said loudly to the room.

Magneto raised his hand and his people quieted. Emma cast a look at her students and they too fell silent.

"First things first, we need for the children to go to the common room. Andrew, Jubilee, and Angelo, I need for you to come with me for a moment." Professor Xavier said and moved to leave the room.

The children and named individuals followed the professor out of the room.

Outside the common room the professor said, "Magneto and Emma are talking with the rest to bring them up to date on our current situation. Andrew, I need for you to open a portal to your dimension and take the children to safety. I assume that Buffy won't have a problem with that?"

Andrew thought for a moment before answering, "I don't think she will, but she also won't be able to accommodate all the children. There are nearly three dozen children all together. She doesn't have that kind of room... but I think I know someone who does... I'll need Xander's help." Andrew said in a considering voice.

After a moment of silence the professor said, "He's on his way. Do what you need to do to get the children to safety."

Andrew felt his heart sink as he realized the implication of what the professor was asking. He couldn't help but ask,

"Does this mean they've developed the virus here?"

"Yes." The professor said grimly and turned to Angelo and Jubilee.

"Professor Frost and I have talked it over and decided that you two are best to watch over the children while we fight the coming battle." Professor Xavier explained.

"I've trained with the X-Men. I can fight." Jubilee said indignantly.

"Yeah, I can fight too." Angelo said in offense.

Professor Xavier looked at the two with admiration and said, "I know, and that is why I'm entrusting the safety of our children to you. The world you are going to has vampires, werewolves, and demons. Just so you know, the reason the two of you were chosen is because your relationship with the children is one of respect. Jubilee, all the children know and like you. There is no one else that I can think of who I can say that about. Angelo, Professor Frost says that you have a gift for dealing with children. With the great number we are sending, we need both of you to be dedicated to their care and defense. If either of you are not up to that challenge, we will make do with someone else."

Jubilee and Angelo thought for a moment before agreeing to the professor's request.

Xander walked into the room and Andrew pulled him away to talk privately.

"Good." The professor said then continued, "Angelo, if you will stay with this group of children, I need for Jubilee to gather the rest of the children and bring them here as well. As soon as Xander and Andrew are ready, we will move you all to safety."

"Yes Professor." Was their simultaneous response.

"One other thing..." The professor said reluctantly.

Angelo and Jubilee gave matching looks of inquiry.

"I will need for Clarissa and Artie to be sent to the dining room." The professor said somberly, obviously not happy with having to say those words.

Without further comment, Jubilee left to gather the remaining children. A moment later Angelo went into the common room.

* * * * *

The portal opened in the living room of Buffy's home, known to all as 'Slayer Central'. Buffy and Willow looked up with matching expressions of worry, both knowing that the next scheduled portal wasn't supposed to open till noon the next day.

"What's up Andrew? Xander?" Buffy asked as the two stepped through the portal and it closed behind them.

"Too much to tell, Buffy. Short version, a virus is about to be unleashed on our world, it could kill everyone, we want to bring our children here to keep them safe." Andrew said with abject despair in his features.

"Shit... Okay, what can we do?" Buffy asked, knowing that she had no other choice.

"I need to borrow a few Slayers to help with the children. There are nearly three dozen of them and we can only afford to send two people to watch over them." Xander said with his own grim look.

"I can do that. What else?" Buffy asked with the need to help if she could.

"Come with us to talk to Angel. He has a hotel... it's the best place I can think of to keep three dozen mutant children safe." Andrew said somberly.

"And you need me to come along to provide credibility for your story?" Buffy asked, knowing her role in this scenario.

Andrew nodded and waited for her answer.

"Let's get going, I take it that time is an issue." Buffy said and grabbed her scythe.

"Are you going to be needing that?" Xander asked in confusion.

"I don't leave home without it." Buffy said and motioned for Andrew to open the portal.

* * * * *

Alan was concerned to see the professor enter the room without Andrew.

"Good, we just finished the history lesson." Emma said and moved out of the way to accommodate Professor Xavier's chair.

"Then down to business. We've developed an anti-viral agent that will neutralize the virus. But it will only be effective while the virus is contained. If the virus gets loose, we're dead... all of us." The professor said to the room with grim determination.

Magneto stepped forward and said, "We will deploy three primary strike teams and two secondary teams to take out the virus before it can be distributed. The first strike team

will neutralize the research facility in Piedmont, Virginia. The team will consist of Mystique as team leader. Gambit, Avalanche, Pyro Quicksilver and Nightcrawler will be her support.

Emma Frost stepped forward and continued, "Team two will neutralize the research facility in Beijing, China. The team leader will be Banshee. His team will include Monique, Mondo, Paige, Shadowcat and Havok."

Kitty and Alex were shocked to be included in the GenX team but moved to Professor Frost's students, so as to stand with their team.

Professor Xavier moved forward and said, "Team three will neutralize the research facility in Johannesburg, South Africa. The team leader will be Cyclops. His team will include Portal, Colossus, Rogue, and Iceman."

The team followed Kitty and Alex's lead and moved together.

Professor Xavier continued, "The secondary teams will be dispatched to neutralize the data warehouses where backups of the research data are maintained. None of this research should be allowed to survive the night. The first secondary team will include Wolverine and Angel. The second will include Storm and Gemini.

Clarissa and Artie entered the room quietly, looking as though they were in trouble.

Professor Xavier noticed the children. "Clarissa and Artie will be joining team two. Clarissa, your code name will be 'Blink'. Artie, yours will be 'Leach'. This is Sean Cassidy, he will be looking after you for a while. Just do what he says and come back home safely." He said in a pained voice, indicating Banshee.

The adults in the room looked at each other, suddenly realizing the gravity of the situation if the professor was willing to use the youngest children in his plan.

"What about us?" Dawn asked, directing her gaze toward the professor.

Magneto looked with contempt at the two women and said, "You're not mutants, what do you intend to do? Bore our enemies to death with long winded stories about your pathetic existence?"

"I've been fighting things that would make you wet your pants for the past three years, but you don't care about that." Dawn said and gave Magneto a considering look before she said, "Maybe you'll care about this." Dawn took Tara's hand into her own and raised her free hand toward the middle of the room.

A wind began to blow from nowhere and spin into a mini-tornado that reached from floor to ceiling, right in the middle of the dining hall. A moment later, Tara raised her free hand toward the tornado and it began to darken and twist wildly. The waterspout made its way across the room toward Magneto and stopped right before him. Dawn squeezed Tara's hand in signal and with a simultaneous motion they lowered their hands and the waterspout fizzled out of existence.

Magneto looked in wonder at the two women then said, "Good enough. Charles?"

Professor Xavier looked with pride at the two women and said, "Tara, your code name will be 'Sprite', Dawn, yours will be 'Tempest'. You will be joining team three."

* * * * *

Angel got into battle stance, with sword in hand, as he saw a vortex open in the lobby of the hotel.

Buffy, Andrew, and Xander stepped out of the vortex and it closed behind them, obviously under their control.

"Buffy?" Angel asked in shock as he straightened and relaxed his hold on his sword.

"Angel, you know how you always say that you help the helpless? We've got about three dozen children that need a place to stay for a few days... you up to it?" Buffy asked casually as if she were talking about the weather.

"What? I mean, of course I'll help but... tell me more." Angel said, obviously wanting to help, but hesitant to give a blank check.

Xander walked across the room and sat on one of the couches in the large room. The rest of the group followed and sat as Andrew began to speak.

"Angel, I've been in a parallel dimension since the hellmouth in Sunnydale was closed. In that world, mutants are beginning to emerge from the general population. Some of the mutants have abilities far beyond those of ordinary men, and this scares the non-mutant population." Andrew said then waited a moment for that to sink in.

Angel looked at Andrew, prompting him to continue.

"These frightened people have created a virus for the singular purpose of exterminating all mutants. We know of one other world where this has been done and the virus mutated and killed everyone. The children we want to bring here are mutants. If we aren't successful in preventing the release of the virus, then at least, they will survive." Andrew said sadly.

"And you want to leave the children with me because...?" Angel asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Because not all of the children look entirely human. Some have physical abnormalities, others have little or no control over the manifestation of their mutant abilities. If they should be stranded in this world, you could integrate them into the demon community and they might have something resembling a normal life." Xander said quietly.

"So are you a mutant?" Angel asked Xander.

Xander gave a tired chuckle and said, "No deadboy, you can't explain me away that easily. I'm just your standard, run of the mill, one-eyed demon-magnet."

"I'm a mutant." Andrew said with pride.

Angel looked with surprise at Andrew, recognizing him as one of Buffy's hangers-on, a nerdy little fellow.

"And thank all the Gods that you are." Xander said with a genuine smile.

At Angel and Buffy's look of confusion he explained.

"If you weren't a mutant, the children wouldn't have any chance of survival, and as I understand it, the professor wouldn't have had any warning until the virus had been released." Xander said with pride in his friend's importance.

"I suppose so." Andrew said in a considering tone, then turned to Angel and asked, "So can the children come here? Either way, we need to get things moving."

"Just one more question." Angel said and looked toward Buffy. "Why did you bring Buffy along?"

"Because she can testify that what I'm saying is true. She has been to my dimension and has met some of the people we are talking about." Andrew said with strength.

Angel nodded and finally said, "Go ahead, bring them here and I promise that they'll be safe."

"Thank you Angel. If we survive this, maybe you could visit my dimension for a vacation... we have almost no demons there." Andrew said pleasantly.

"You keep saying 'my dimension', aren't you from this one?" Angel asked in confusion.

"Yes, but that one is my home now. And I'd better get back to defend it." Andrew said and the portal appeared with a sweep of his hand.

"Does this thing lead to my place?" Buffy asked before following.

"Yeah, three steps and we'll be there." Andrew said and stepped into the swirling vortex.

* * * * *

"I'm going to deliver the children, then I'll be back for whichever Slayers are going to help out." Andrew said as he opened another portal.

"We'll be ready." Buffy said, noticing Willow and Faith watching.

Andrew nodded and stepped into the next portal, followed closely by Xander.

"Good Luck." She said and turned to get to work, organizing her troops.

* * * * *

Andrew and Xander emerged from the portal in the MedLab. At Xander's look of surprise Andrew said, "I know that this is where you really want to be, Xan. I needed for you to be there to back me up with Buffy and Angel. Now that they've agreed to help, you can stay here with Remy and protect him."

"Thanks Andy. If you need me for anything, just call." Xander said as Andrew stepped to his next destination.

* * * * *

"Is everyone ready to go?" Andrew asked the group of children who were all carrying suitcases, boxes, blankets, and assorted toys.

"Yeah!" the kids chorused.

"Follow me." Andrew said with false enthusiasm and led the way through the portal to emerge in the lobby of the Hyperion Hotel.

The children were unusually quiet as they explored their new environment.

One of the children from the GenX school walked up to Angel and whispered to him. Shock registered in Angel's eyes and if it were possible for a vampire to go pale, anyone watching would have sworn that was what had happened.

Andrew turned to face an empty wall and opened a portal into Buffy's living room.

"All ashore that's going ashore." Andrew said to the group of Slayers who were laden with possessions much as the children had been.

"Is anyone staying in Cleveland?" Andrew asked as Slayer after Slayer stepped through the portal.

"Yeah, Rona and Caridad are staying. They'll be able to handle it alone for a while. When I told these ladies about the chance to go to L.A. for a few days, I was overrun with volunteers." Buffy said proudly.

"Thanks Buffy. I hope to see you again soon." Andrew said sadly before closing the portal and creating one for him alone.

"We'll keep a light on for you." Buffy said as Andrew walked through the portal and vanished.

Chapter 7: I Touch the Fire

Andrew walked into the dining room to find the people there in groups, talking quietly amongst themselves with Magneto, Emma, and the professor going from group to group.

"Portal, you're with us." Scott said and motioned for Andrew to join them.

Andrew made his way to the group and noticed that almost everyone had changed into uniforms.

"You need to get changed... I think Alan has been waiting for you." Scott said and looked at his brother.

Andrew nodded and made his way to Alan.

"We need to get changed for the battle." Andrew said with hesitation in his voice.

"Yeah, come on... Alex, come on, we have a uniform for you too." Alan said as he headed for the door.

Alex fell into step along side them when Andrew said, "Shortcut."

"Not this time Andy. Let's take the long way this once." Alan said quietly.

Andrew nodded and followed along.

* * * * *

When they reached the locker room, Andrew opened his locker and began to change, deep in his own thoughts.

"What's that?" Alex asked as Alan donned his own uniform.

"They decided to make my uniform different so they could tell Scott and I apart at a glance." Alan said as he pulled on his brown leather uniform with green accents.

Andrew looked at the form-fitting uniform and decided that he liked the way it looked.

"It suits you, love." Andrew said with a smile.

"Go ahead and kiss him, you know you want to." Alex said with exasperation as he put on his own uniform.

Timidly Andrew walked up to Alan and pulled him down for a deep, passionate kiss.

After a few moments Alex finally said, "Are we ready to go?"

Alan pulled out of the kiss and said, "I guess so. Let's go save the world."

Andrew opened a portal and the three uniformed men walked into the dining room.

* * * * *

Team one boarded the jet that Magneto brought and took off for their destination. Soon afterward, team two boarded the *Blackbird*, piloted by Banshee.

//Andrew, can you get the team to your destination?// The professor asked telepathically.

//I need to know where it is.// Andrew responded.

Images and coordinates flooded his mind and instantly Andrew knew not only their destination, but the layout of the entire compound.

//I've never tried to jump continents before, but I'm sure I can get them there safely.// Andrew thought with confidence.

//I thought so. I will be monitoring the progress of all the teams from Cerebro. If you need anything, just call to me and I'll do my best to help.// The professor sent before letting the link fall silent.

Andrew looked to Scott and gave a nod.

"Whenever you're ready Portal." Cyclops said in his team leader voice.

A moment later team three was at their destination.

* * * * *

"Sprite, Tempest, stay outside the facility and guard our backs." Cyclops said in a commanding tone.

Tara and Dawn looked around and decided to get to high ground for the best view of the surrounding area.

"Portal, you are the designated hacker of our group. You need to destroy the accumulated data while the rest of us will pump this anti-virus into the tanks to neutralize the virus." Cyclops said as they made their way through the darkened facility.

Since it was the wee hours of the morning in Africa, there were only a few guards on duty. The strike team dispatched them quickly and efficiently as they made their way purposefully to their destination. However, one of the guards was able to call for reinforcements.

* * * * *

Andrew worked furiously on the computer and ran into one obstacle after another before reaching the core of information that he was searching for. Once past the security he launched a little virus into the system to reformat the entire network.

"Progress report?" Cyclops asked as he poked his head into the room.

"The mainframe is toast. All storage devices have been reformatted and will soon be rewritten with zeros. I've destroyed the software but I recommend destroying the hardware too... just to be safe." He said and got up from the work station.

"Understood. Can you do it, or do you need help?" Cyclops asked professionally.

"I've got it. Be back in two minutes." Andrew said and ported to the basement.

Andrew located the essential hardware and created a portal below it that sent it into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

As Andrew stepped into the main room Cyclops turned and said, "The professor just said that Sprite and Tempest need assistance outside."

"Got it." Andrew said and cast his mind to find the two women.

* * * * *

"What's the situation?" Andrew asked as he appeared behind Dawn and Tara.

"We can't keep them from advancing. We've sent tornadoes, waterspouts, sheer winds... everything we can think of and they just keep coming." Dawn said with frustration.

"Tara, do you think you can herd the strays back to the main group by yourself?" Andrew asked seriously.

"Yeah, I can do that." Tara said with some relief, knowing that Andrew had a plan.

"Dawn, you and I need to pool our powers to force them into as tight a group as we can." Andrew said and took hold of Dawn's hand.

"What spell?" Dawn asked, assured by Andrew's confidence.

"Tornado." Andrew said with concentration.

Dawn focused her power into a tornado, visualizing it into being. Once the tornado was established, Andrew focused his own power and streaks of flame could be seen in the tornado.

The tornado whipped around the group of frightened soldiers. Occasionally one of them would escape from the tight group and would be hit with a concussive blast of water.

Finally, after long minutes of herding the men, Andrew determined that they were close enough and opened a portal below their feet. A moment later they were gone.

"Where did you send them?" Dawn asked in wonder as the battle abruptly ended.

"To Detroit." Andrew said and let go of Dawn's hand.

"What? You sent a group of African soldiers to Detroit... they're going to get their asses kicked, aren't they?" Dawn asked, beginning to see the humor of Andrew's decision.

"Probably, either way, they'll be out of our hair till we're done here." Andrew said and opened a portal back to the

control room.

* * * * *

//Portal, I need for you to evacuate an injured X-Man.// The professor sent with dread.

[Oh Gods, oh Gods no.] Andrew thought to himself before responding. //Tell me where and I'm gone.//

Andrew's mind was flooded with the images of where he needed to be and a moment later he was there.

He looked around at the scene of the explosion. There was burning debris as far as he could see.

[Oh shit!] Andrew gasped mentally as he saw the bloody form of Alan laying a few feet away. He was barely recognizable except for the brown and green uniform. He was missing a leg and bleeding so badly that Andrew couldn't tell where his injuries were.

Andrew was about to whisk them away when he remembered the last time he ported in an emergency. He picked up the limp form of Alan and opened a multiple portal.

"I'm so sorry Andrew. It was booby-trapped..." Storm said as she made her way through some burning debris.

"Come on, we're going back to the mansion." Andrew said and walked four steps to the MedLab.

"Hank, we have an emergency here!" Andrew called out.

A moment later Ororo stepped through the portal and Andrew finally noticed that she was also injured.

Hank ran into the room and gasped at the bloody form that Andrew was carrying.

"Who?" He asked as he laid Alan on the bed.

Andrew then realized that Alan's face was completely obscured by blood, Hank couldn't recognize him.

"Alan." Andrew said and looked down at the blood covering his hands and arms.

//Portal, your team has completed their mission. You need to get them out of there.// The professor sent with sympathy underlying the announcement.

//Right away Professor.// Andrew responded and said to Hank, "I have to get back to my team, take care of him."

"Of course, do what you need to do." Hank said and turned his attention back to Alan.

Andrew opened a portal and stepped through.

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"Portal, we're ready to evacuate. Get Sprite and Tempest to safety then come back for us." Cyclops said before he noticed the blood covering Andrew's arms and chest.

Andrew sadly nodded and went to get the witches.

* * * * *

After team three was safe at the mansion, Andrew made his way to the MedLab to find Alan laying peacefully on a bed. Hank was attending to someone in the next room.

"Hank, how is he?" Andrew asked as he entered the next room to find Hank and Jean working on a young woman he

didn't know. Emma was working on Artie while Clarissa was watching, crying and terrified.

Hank looked at Andrew and his expression told the story before the words could be said, "There's nothing more I can do for him."

Andrew felt pain pierce through his heart as he asked, "How long?"

"Six hours at the most."

Andrew felt his tears falling and walked in a daze back to Alan's side.

He looked at the bandages and tubes, then finally he gently moved some things out of his way and scooted himself onto the edge of the bed to lay beside Alan, careful not to jostle him or cause him any pain.

A few minutes later Hank walked into the room and said, "Andrew, you can't do this..."

Hank stopped as Andrew looked up at him with pain and loss in his eyes.

"You said there is nothing more that you can do to save him... I want to be here... he wants me here." Andrew finished and laid his head on Alan's shoulder, the only part of his torso that wasn't covered by a bandage.

"You're right. I'll be with my other patients if you have need of me." Hank said and left the room, barely containing his tears.

* * * * *

Hank, Ororo, and Professor Xavier sat in the room silently watching Andrew and Alan.

After an hour of silence Andrew opened his eyes suddenly and gasped. With a look of deep concentration on his face he let loose his power and a portal moved from the ceiling to the floor... and they were gone, Alan, Andrew, and the bed.

The three people in the room looked at each other in question. The professor left the room first, heading for Cerebro, to search for a clue as to their destination.

Hank and Ororo left the room a moment later, each unwilling to voice their flicker of hope that Andrew might have found a way...

Epilogue

Three hours had passed and no one had heard from Andrew or Alan. Artie was recovering in his room with Clarissa constantly by his side.

Clarissa had been the teleporter for team two as Nightcrawler had been for team one and Andrew had been for team three. The professor said that Clarissa wouldn't be able to function if she was afraid, but she would be brave for her best friend, Artie. So Artie was included on the team.

Artie had been told that he was responsible for Clarissa's protection. When a soldier got past their defenses and was about to shoot Clarissa, Artie shielded her with his own body.

The professor relayed the story with pride to the X-Men and announced that he wanted everyone to give Artie the praise and respect that he deserved.

The other teams did not come through the experience unscathed. Ororo suffered a broken arm that she barely acknowledged since it was trivial compared to the injuries Alan had sustained in the explosion.

Besides the incident with Clarissa and Artie, team two also had two other casualties. Monique was hit full force by a grenade. Had she been a non-mutant, she would have instantly died. Thankfully her mutant ability included abnormally strong skin and bones plus a healing factor that would eventually have her back to herself.

Mondo didn't have the benefit of a healing factor and would need to heal the old-fashioned way from the severe concussion that was keeping him unconscious.

And the most dire of the losses came to team one. Gambit was shot in the head at close range. Mystique efficiently dispatched his attacker and took over Gambit's duties as team one's hacker. All the teams were successful, but they still could not calculate the cost.

* * * * *

Eric and Charles sat in Charles office silently for a long while before Charles finally said, "I was naïve to think that mankind and mutants were ready to embrace coexistence. Though I continue to have hope for the future..."

"And the extermination of non-mutants will do more harm than good for mutant-kind. Those two young ladies give me hope that some non-mutants may be valuable to society." Eric said in his own concession.

"Do you think that there is a common ground where our two philosophies can coexist?" Charles asked somewhat rhetorically while gazing off into the distance.

"Perhaps." Eric said, looking into his own distant place.

Eric then asked, "What about us? I mean, if our fight is over. Is there anything left between us to salvage?"

"Before I answer, who won?" Charles asked quietly.

"In this fight, there were only degrees of losing, there were no winners." Eric said seriously.

Charles nodded in acceptance.

"So what do you say Charles? Is there any reason for me to hope?" Eric asked with pleading in his eyes.

"Oh yes, even when I hated you most, I also loved you. I have been disappointed in some of your decisions, but it

never stopped my love." Charles said softly.

"Well put Charles. So... now what?" Eric asked tentatively.

"Now you come over here and give me the hug that I so desperately need after the day we've had." Charles said with anguish creeping into his voice.

Eric moved to Charles without hesitation and nearly pulled him out of the chair with the power of his heartfelt hug.

The End

Follow Andrew and Alan to Book 4: 'The Well of Hurt'

...Or...

Follow the X-Men to Book 5: 'Heroes Can Be Hurt'